Lee House: A room by room history

If the walls at the Willamette Heritage Center could talk, they’d tell a tale to rival any reality TV show.

The original owner of the Jason Lee House, for instance, came to the Oregon Territory in 1834 with high hopes of converting the natives. He married twice, only to lose each wife in childbirth. Facing failure with the Indians and political intrigue from his church, he was summoned home and died at 41.

Until now, the three pioneer-era homes at the center, formerly known as Mission Mill Museum, have barely hinted at such drama. “We had a lot of furniture but not a lot of volunteers to share the history,” said Keni Sturgeon, curator and museum director. The heritage center has been working to change that. A renovated, re-imagined 1841 Jason Lee House reopened to visitors last month. The 1841 Willamette Mission Parsonage and the 1847 John Boon House will get similar treatment over the next two to three years.

“It’s a big deal on a completely different level,” Sturgeon said. “It’s the first re-do of permanent exhibits (in the historic homes) since 1984. ... After nearly 30 years, it’s time to change.”

The updates are part of the heritage center’s new mission of telling the wider

Mid-Valley story, not just that of its former woolen mill and the pioneer homes that were moved to the site.

The heritage center is cooperating with other institutions, especially Willamette University and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, to piece together that story.

Cost for the three-year, three-home project is estimated at $450,000. About one-third of that has been raised, most notably with a matching grant for $137,730 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Sturgeon pored over letters, books, maps and many other sources to create the Jason Lee House exhibits.

“My goal is for people to know that the missionaries who came here, came to work with the Native Americans,” Sturgeon said. “They brought some positive things with them, but there were negative consequences for both.”

She hopes the gradual changes will encourage more people to visit the heritage center and to spend more time there.

Two new outreach efforts will help center staff track visitor satisfaction and tweak exhibits in response. Hannah Marsall, who earned a master’s in history at Western Oregon University, will survey visitors this summer, and Alison Boland of Willamette University will brainstorm hands-on activities with summer campers to supplement the exhibits. Both projects are funded by grants.

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‘The Lees and the Oregon Mission’

What’s there: Lee’s four-poster bed, his traveling desk and the Bible he preached from. Panels tell about the lives of Lee and the two women he married: the resolute Anna Maria Pittman, who came west as a single woman, and the cultured Lucy Thompson, who married Lee 15 months after his first wife’s death.

Quote: “You will be anxious to know if there is any prospect of my having a Protector. Let me tell you there is. Mr. J. Lee has broached the subject, it remains for me to say whither I shall be his helpmate in his important charge...” —Anna Maria Pittman to her parents, 1837

Don’t miss: Baby caps in the cradle, a poignant reminder of the dangers of childbirth and infancy on

‘Education in the Early Years’

What’s there: Panels share the history of the Oregon Mission Manual Labor School, founded by the missionaries for native children and the schools that followed: the Old Oregon Institute for settlers’ children, the federal Indian schools, Chemawa Indian School and Willamette University, which traces its history to the Old Oregon Institute.

Quote: “The first rule here after cleanliness and obedience is ‘No Indian Talk.’ ” —report from Forest Grove Indian School superintendent Melville C. Wilkinson, 1882

Don’t miss: Two pages from a New England primer, which taught through such rote sentences as, “Xerxes the great did die, and so must you and I.”

‘Mission Expansion’

What’s there: Accounts of early explorers in the Northwest; lives of Kalapuya people before European contact; history of Methodist missions in the Mid-Valley and elsewhere; beginnings of dissent in the ranks.

Quote: “The rainy season was fast approaching, and a house was wanted to shelter us when it arrived. But first we had to prepare our tools, and gear, our oxen. We handled axes and augurs, hung a grind stone, split rails, made yokes and bows for the oxen and made a yard to catch them in.” —Daniel Lee’s reminiscences, 1888-89

Don’t miss: Case of artifacts including pink crockery from the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii). Apparently missionaries broke up their four- to five-month sea

‘Decline, Closure and Legacy of the Methodist Mission to Oregon’

What’s there: Panels tell how discouragement, lack of success and infighting led to Jason Lee’s recall in 1843 and subsequent closure of most Willamette Valley Methodist missions. Touch screens relate what happened to many of the missionaries afterward. Other panels cover the removal of Indians to the Grand Ronde reservation and the rise of Methodist circuit riders.

Quote: “Another thing that encourages us is that this country is filling up with those that need the gospel more, if possible, than the heathen!” —Almira D. Raymond letter, 1842

Don’t miss: Touch-screen entry for Margaret Jewett Smith Bailey Waddle Crane, a strong-willed single woman who resisted pressure to marry either of the two single male missionaries.

If you go

What: Willamette Heritage Center at The Mill
Where: 1313 Mill St. SE
When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily except Sundays and some holidays
Admission: $6, $5 for ages 55 and older, $4 for students, $3 for ages 6 to 17 and free for ages younger than 6 and everyone on Tuesdays; plus free for active-duty military and families through Labor Day